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Over 6,400,000 Readers December 2023 | Volume 52, Number 12

Lessons From the Great Covid Cover-Up

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The following is adapted from a talk delivered on November 1, 2023, at the Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship on Hillsdale's Washington, D.C., campus, as part of the AWC Family Foundation Lecture Series.

THE COVID cover-up began in China. But in a way we make too big a deal of that. No one should be surprised that a totalitarian government run by the Chinese Communist Party would seek to cover up its responsibility for a worldwide pandemic. What was mind-jarring—and what we should focus our attention on—is the cover-up in our own country spearheaded by Dr. Anthony Fauci and his fellow public health bureaucrats. And they might have gotten away with their deception if a federal judge hadn't ordered their emails released.

In brief, these emails reveal that at the same time Dr. Fauci and other public health "experts" were publicly disavowing the idea that the Covid virus originated with a leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China, they were in general agreement among themselves that that was likely what had happened. So why hide the fact?

RAND PAUL was elected to the U.S. Senate from Kentucky in 2010, following a successful career as a physician. He studied at Baylor University and earned his M.D. from Duke Medical School. A former president of Lions Clubs International, he is the founder of the Southern Kentucky Lions Eye Clinic, and he performs *pro bono* eye surgeries for patients across Kentucky and around the world. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Case Against Socialism* and *Deception: The Great Covid Cover-Up*.

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In January 2020, Fauci was told that the Covid virus appeared "inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory." He and his fellow scientists were worried that it may have originated in the Wuhan lab because they knew that the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), under Fauci's direction, had been funding work at the lab for years. They also knew of a paper by Ralph Baric and Shi Zhengli describing gain-of-function research—which involves taking two viruses and combining their genetics to create something more dangerous, more lethal, or more contagious—on various coronaviruses at the Wuhan lab.

On February 1, just before 3:00 a.m., Fauci sent an email to Robert Kadlec, then-Secretary for Preparedness and Response at Health and Human Services. It read: "This just came out today. Gives a balanced view." He attached an article published in *Science* arguing that Covid had jumped from bats to humans and seeking to discredit the lab-leak theory. When this email came to light, I was initially puzzled about its timing and urgency. But then I learned that one of Kadlec's duties was to chair the committee responsible for screening gain-of-function proposals for safety purposes—and that the Wuhan coronavirus research proposal never came before his committee!

For a long time, even we in the U.S. Senate didn't know that Kadlec headed the gain-of-function screening committee because of the pervasive secrecy throughout our government. The makeup of the committee is a secret, its deliberations are secret, and those on the committee do not like answering questions asked by the American people's elected leaders in Congress. To this day, it is an open question how gain-of-function research was funded in Wuhan without committee review. It is not a stretch to think that someone with authority skirted the safety review process. If so, that person would have had a good reason to be very worried, even to the point of dishonesty, when the pandemic broke out.

Jeremy Farrar, the Anthony Fauci of the UK, told his brother that in the early stages of the pandemic, "a few scientists, including me, were beginning to suspect this might be a lab accident." Farrar writes in his book *Spike*: "During that period, I would do things I had never done before: acquire a burner phone, hold clandestine meetings, keep difficult secrets." Indeed, many Western bureaucrats, especially in the U.S., began using various forms of communication to shield their messages from future records requests. We have an email from one of Fauci's assistants instructing other government employees to avoid using government email addresses. Which, by the way, is a crime.

Kristian G. Andersen, a professor of immunology and microbiology at Scripps Research, headed up a group of virologists who, by his own account, were "prompted by Jeremy Farrar, Tony Fauci, and [National Institutes of Health Director] Francis Collins" to research and publish a paper that would "provide agnostic and scientifically informed hypotheses around the origins of the virus." Andersen had written to Farrar a week earlier, alarmed by the fact that the virus appeared to be manmade. But now, under pressure, he and others were circling the wagons and changing their tune.

By mid-February, British zoologist Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance and a Fauci ally, organized a letter that was published in *The Lancet* stating that the authors stood together "to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin." What the letter failed to mention is the fact that Daszak's organization received many millions of taxpayer dollars from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the State Department—before and during the pandemic—and that millions were funneled through EcoHealth to the Wuhan lab, some of which went to coronavirus research.

In March, the Andersen group's paper, arguing that Covid didn't come from a lab, was published in *Nature Medicine*. By that time, corporate media and Big Tech had taken to labeling anyone who supported the lab-leak theory as a purveyor of misinformation and disinformation. An ABC News article that cited the Andersen paper is a case in point: "Sorry, conspiracy theorists. Study concludes COVID-19 'is not a laboratory construct.'"

As we now know—thanks to the release of the Twitter Files following Elon Musk's purchase of the company—the mainstream media and Big Tech did not act alone. In fact, many of their efforts to censor speech about the lab-leak theory, lockdowns, masks, vaccines, school closures, and a host of pandemic-related topics were directed by the FBI and other intelligence agencies. In other words, the First Amendment was thrown out the window.

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The moral debate over gain-of-function research has been going on for a long time. It came to prominence with the debate over avian flu research in the early 2010s. Avian flu is a very bad disease, but like most animal viruses, it is adapted for its host—in this case chickens or other birds. It does not often infect humans, but when it does, certain strains kill up to 50 percent of those infected.

During an outbreak in 2010, Dutch virologist Ron Fouchier wondered if it would be possible to make the avian flu contagious through the air to mammals, and his research became highly controversial. Proponents argued that it could provide valuable data for scientists to predict or combat future pandemics. Opponents argued that it could cause pandemics either through lab leaks or terrorism. Fauci was intimately familiar with this debate, because Fouchier's research was funded by Fauci's agency, and he argued at the time that the potential benefits outweighed the risks.

A growing number of virologists and other scientists worry that a lab leak will happen again, and with even more serious consequences. With Covid, the mortality rate was far less than one percent. Experiments are now being carried out with viruses that have the potential for mortality rates between 15 and 50 percent. In 2021, MIT biochemist Kevin Esvelt wrote:

> Once we consider the possibility of misuse [of gain-of-function research], let alone creative misuse, such research looks like a gamble that civilization can't afford to risk. . . . I implore every scientist, funder, and nation working in this field: Please stop. No more trying to discover or make pandemic-capable viruses, enhance their virulence, or assemble them more easily. No more attempting to learn which components allow viruses to efficiently infect or replicate within human cells, or to devise inheritable ways to evade immunity. No more experiments likely to disseminate blueprints for plagues.

The potential for disaster cannot be overstated. Right now, people can order synthetic DNA on the internet, and if they know what they're doing, they can make the polio virus, among many others. And there are increasing numbers of individuals who have the knowhow: according to Esvelt, "The U.S. grants 125 doctoral degrees in virology each year, accounting for one-third of the total worldwide. At least four times as many individuals with degrees in related fields . . . possess similar skills."

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ISSN 0277-8432

The required information is publicly available due to taxpayer-funded initiatives to identify all the viruses in the world. With the support of people like Peter Daszak and Bill Gates, the U.S. has been the top international funder of pandemic virus identification for decades. This should give us pause: these programs involve digging rare viruses out of caves where humans might never encounter them and transporting them to major metropolitan areas, manipulating viruses to make them more dangerous and transmissible, and publishing the resulting knowledge to the world.

Even if the goal is preventing future pandemics, the risk-benefit ratio doesn't add up. While advocates for identifying the world's viruses argue that the knowledge gained will aid in developing vaccines, decades of virus identification have been fruitless, as no human vaccine has been developed in advance of a human epidemic. If we continue down this path, Esvelt believes that "deliberate pandemics" will kill "many more people than identification could save."

To think that we can prevent future pandemics, even as we continue to seek, catalog, and manipulate dangerous viruses, is the height of hubris. Over the last few years, public health "experts" were wrong about almost everything. If we are to avoid these kinds of catastrophes in the future, we must reform government and rein in out-of-control scientists and their enablers.

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In December 2022, Congress passed a 4,155-page spending bill. It had a price tag of $1.7 trillion, including over a trillion dollars that had to be borrowed. It was appropriately called an "omni," since everything but the kitchen sink was thrown in. On page 3,354, the Secretary of Health and Human Services was directed "not [to] fund research conducted by a foreign entity at a facility located in a country of concern . . . involving pathogens of pandemic potential or biological agents or toxins."

This was a welcome attempt to stop the funding of dangerous research around the world, but Americans and their representatives must watch carefully to see whether our public health agencies attempt to sidestep it. The recent behavior of NIAID and NIH bureaucrats, as exemplified by their attempts to deceive Congress and the American people during the Covid pandemic, does not instill confidence.

A group of 34 prominent scientists recently presented a series of reforms to "strengthen the US government's enhanced potential pandemic pathogen framework." This Gain-of-Function Reform Group (GoF Group) recommended that gain-of-function experiments that confer "efficient human transmissibility" on a pathogen should be regulated. Adopting this standard would explicitly stop bureaucrats like Fauci from dancing around the gain-of-function definition and looking the other way as researchers create viruses that spread more easily in humans.

Current regulations allow gain-of-function research to occur if the research is said to be concerned with "developing and producing" vaccines. However, dangerous research should not be permitted or funded on the basis of a potential product. Rather, we should ban clearly dangerous research and highly scrutinize anything else that "could enhance the virulence or transmissibility of any pathogen," as the GoF Group recommends.

We should treat this research as we do nuclear weapons—as the potential threat to human life is even greater. Ideally, as Rutgers University molecular biologist Richard Ebright recommends, "responsibility for US oversight of gain-of-function research of concern should be assigned to a single, independent federal agency that does not perform research and does not fund research. The oversight of research on fissionable materials by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission provides a precedent and a model."

Another pervasive problem is conflict of interest. Under our current lax guidelines, researchers can essentially approve their own grants if they toe the official bureaucratic line. Consider the particularly egregious example of Kristian Andersen receiving a million-dollar grant mere months after abruptly switching his scientific opinion on Covid's origin from a likely lab leak to "natural spillover." We have always known that recipients of federal dollars might try to game the system. Conflict of interest regulations are littered throughout the federal code. One would think recusal for a conflict of interest would be the standard fallback procedure for all federal science funding. Yet when I questioned Fauci about whether any of the scientists on the vaccine-approval boards also received royalties from the drug companies that make vaccines, he responded that he did not have to inform Congress about royalty payments. In addition to the fact that he was the highest paid employee of the federal government, his own net worth is estimated to have doubled to more than $12.5 million during the pandemic. This is an insult to the American taxpayer and the American ideal. We should not allow this kind of obvious corruption.

The GoF Group calls for regulators to "recuse any individual whose agency is funding or participating in the proposed [gain-of-function research] from decision making in the [pandemic] review process." Reviewers "should be subject to conflict of interest rules." They also recommended including "representatives of civil society" in the review of potential pandemic pathogens.

For several years, I have proposed something similar for all grants funded by the federal government. Even before I became aware of the extent of Fauci's abusive reign, I introduced the BASIC Research Act, which would add at least one scientist to each funding committee from a major field of research that has unanimity of support, such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and Alzheimer's. The goal is to create more debate on the best use of limited government research funds. I would also add a taxpayer advocate to all funding committees. Perhaps then we would start to question absurd "scientific" research grants, such as the $2.3 million the NIH spent injecting beagle puppies with cocaine, or the $3 million NIH grant to put hamsters on steroids and watch them fight.

In addition, my legislation would prohibit grant applicants from requesting their own friends for funding review. We should also make all federal grant applications public.

To prevent what happened during the Covid pandemic from happening again, Congress must address the concentration of power over long periods of time in the hands of unelected and unaccountable bureaucrats. In particular, it should divide the power of the NIAID into three separate institutes overseeing allergic diseases, infectious diseases, and immunologic diseases. Each institute should be led by a director who is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate for a limited term of five years.

Anthony Fauci—who wielded tremendous power over many decades—funded dangerous research, lied to Congress and the American people, flip-flopped on many of his prognostications, issued edicts that defied science, and attacked and smeared his scientific critics. His reprehensible behavior reminded me of nothing so much as C.S. Lewis's description of the moral busybody:

> Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. . . . [T]hose who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience.

We the American people must not allow bureaucratic "experts" to endanger our lives, lie to us, or curtail our constitutional rights. Never again. ■

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